

Learning to Fly Fighters - And Other Lessons

It happened in the fall of 1944. A scant month earlier, I had still been flying combat with a Mustang fighter group out of San Severo, Italy. Now, after a leave in Wisconsin and some R&R, I was given my next assignment: Waycross Army Airfield, Georgia. The base was one of several in the southeast known as fighter RTU's, Replacement Training Units and the older P-40's with which they had been equipped, were gradually being replaced with a front line fighter, the P-51. It was definitely an anti-climax, this job of shepherding a bunch of new guys, but I consoled myself with the fact that at least it was a fighter base. Situated three or four miles north of town, it was typical of the flying training bases of that time. The maintenance and administrative buildings, like their inhabitants, were intended to serve, in the vernacular of the time, "for the duration of hostilities plus six months." From the looks of the buildings, it was going to be a near thing, whether they would make it or not.

Newly graduated Second Lieutenants mingled with a few instructors from the Training Command made up the body of students. They were given 70 or 80 hours of fighter time in preparation for overseas assignments. The curriculum consisted of transition fighter flying, aerial and ground gunnery, combat tactics, and a smattering of other experience thought by Headquarters in Tampa to be relevant and helpful to pursuit pilots in their future pursuits.

Since I was already a captain, I was made a Flight Commander, meaning that I had inherited four other instructors and about twenty students. The squadron operations officer took me around to the ready room and introduced me to the instructors of my flight. They were about evenly divided between overseas returnees, like myself, and students who had been held over from previous classes when instructors were in short supply. Smitty and Richards were the two holdovers of this latter group. Mac was a First Lieutenant who had flown a tour in fighter-bombers from Sicily and Corsica; Charley Ross, also a Lieutenant was back from the Eighth in England. As much as I could tell from an initial appraisal, they were all good guys; pro's, who went about their business with a minimum of fuss.

I spent the first weeks trying to get a handle on the training program and the people in the squadron. In the process I got to know Smitty a little earlier than I would have liked, but under the circumstances, I had no choice.

I think that, originally, he would have preferred to have moved out with his own class on an overseas assignment, but accepted his being held behind as an instructor with good grace and tried to make the best of it. He was a likable chap and although he was short of experience and fighter time, he did his job as well as he was able, and the students generally accepted and respected him for it. Ellis was an exception. Although he was a student fighter pilot, he was not fresh out of flying school. He had served as an instructor in Advanced Flying School, and had amassed a significant amount of flying time in the AT-6 in the process. He was also a First Lieutenant, which made it a little awkward for the Second Lieutenant instructors like Smitty. Ellis took few pains to disguise his disdain for them, adopting a tolerant and patronizing air that did not sit well with me.

One day I was in the ready room when Smitty and Ellis came in after a scheduled individual combat exercise. Ellis dropped his parachute onto an empty

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chair and then, when he was sure that he had center stage, proclaimed loudly, for the benefit of everyone else in the room, "I said it before and I'll say it again. I've never been whipped in the air yet." It was quiet for a moment except for a snicker from one of the other students.

I looked at Smitty and he was trying to smile, but it did not come easily. I caught up with him after the post flight critique, took him aside and asked, "What the hell happened up there."

"Well," he answered with a trace of embarrassment, "He's pretty good - as a matter of fact, he waxed my ass." It was as much an apology as a statement of fact. I said nothing, dismissing him with an "OK, Smitty. See you later." But I was seething inside and was not about to let such an open affront to one of my instructors go unchallenged.

I went up to the office where an operations clerk was typing out the schedule for the following day and told him to schedule me with Ellis for individual simulated combat. He looked up to tell me that that square had been filled in and the syllabus called for a different mission to be flown tomorrow. He must have seen something in my face that caused him to change his mind. "Yes sir", he said, as he turned back to his typewriter.

Well, he was no dummy; he knew something was up and it was going to be all over the squadron by tomorrow. There was no backing out now. I felt confident I could handle Ellis all right but there was always the chance that he could get lucky and I just didn't want to think about the possibility of his coming into the ready room tomorrow with the same boast as he made today, with me as the goat. As the old cowboy saying went, "There never was a horse that couldn't be rode; never was a cowboy who couldn't be thrown."

During the last several weeks, each time I was up alone, getting familiar with the area, I had been experimenting with trying to do a double Immelman with the P-51. An Immelman consisted of a dive to pick up some speed and then a pull-up as if into a loop, except that half way around, as the aircraft came level in an inverted position, it was half rolled into the upright position. I found that if I cheated a little on the first one, rolling out before the nose got down to the horizon and immediately pulled up into the second one, I could just get over the top at full throttle. Now, as I thought about tomorrow's flight, I figured that I might just be able to put that stunt to good use.

The following day I met Ellis and gave him a perfunctory pre-flight briefing. There wasn't much to it - he had heard it all the day before. He wasn't exactly cocky but I got the impression that he was stifling a yawn, so I cut the talk short. Individual combat training consisted of a two-ship flight, the instructor leading with the student flying the wing position until reaching the designated altitude and area. The combat was begun by each pilot turning 90 degrees away from the other, flying for half a minute, making a 180 and keeping to the right on the subsequent head-on pass. As the two aircraft passed each other, the maneuvering was begun, the object of which was to gain a firing position behind the opponent.

After take off Ellis formed on my wing and we climbed out to the designated area. He tucked it in real tight, I suppose to make me call him on the radio to move out. I wouldn't give him the satisfaction and merely looked out for other aircraft as

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if I didn't really notice. When we reached altitude, I gave a hand signal and we turned to begin our outbound parting leg. I picked him up after the one eighty and held a course so that we passed a hundred yards apart. I reduced the throttle and started a gentle turn to the left, exactly opposite to what he did and expected me to do. He stood it on a wing and came tearing after me at high speed. I continued my slow turn, waiting until he closed to about 500 yards, with at least a 100 mph speed advantage. Now! I flipped onto my back and horsed back on the stick in a tight max-G split S. As I got past the vertical and started the pull-out, I went to full throttle, 61 inches of Mercury and continued accelerating, easing the stick a little as I started up into my Immelman. As soon as I approached the horizontal in an inverted position, and caught sight of the horizon, I half-rolled and started up into a second Immelman. I was getting pretty slow as the nose pointed skyward but after I passed the vertical, the nose dropped rather easily and I was careful to use no sudden or heavy control pressure. She was just at the stalling point as the nose came through the horizon and the engine torque rolled the aircraft right side up as it began to gain speed.

I spotted Ellis about 7-8000 feet below and to my right. I don't know what kind of maneuver he'd been through, but then, I don't think he did either. I had counted on him not being able to follow me through the first part of the maneuver because of his overspeed and then stalling out as he was going straight up, trying to follow me, which would have given him a handful, keeping him occupied with getting the aircraft under control. Apparently that was pretty much what happened. He was pointed away from me so it was a fairly easy thing to dive into his six o'clock low position. As soon as I was on him, in range, it was all over, even though he was doing a pretty good job of trying to shake me. I had taken the precaution of putting us both on the squadron common frequency immediately after take off so now everyone in the air was part of the audience, listening to all my transmissions.

"Come on, DO something, Ellis, don't just let me sit back here and hammer your ass!" I shouted into my mike in mock disgust. He was really making me work but I hung back a little so that I could play my position, making sure that he couldn't get me to over run him. After a few more minutes, I came on the R/T again and said, "Well, that's enough, if that's all your going to do, we might as well knock it off. Throttle back and join on me. I'm starting a turn to the right."

After he was back on my wing I wasted no time in heading straight back to the field in a high-speed descent. After we were on the ground I headed into the operations shack, put my gear away and came out and waited for him. When he came into the ready room, he looked a little shocked, and I thought, a touch confused. The swagger was gone.

I decided against humiliating him any further, settling for a few quiet comments on the flight. I couldn't resist one final jab, telling him that he didn't do too badly, certainly no worse than any one else. I think he was too bewildered to even hear anything I said. Besides disbelief, there was something else on his mind. He didn't understand what had happened, only that if I had been an enemy pilot, he would probably have died 20 minutes ago and THAT possibility had never

Learning to Fly Fighters - And Other Lessons

entered his head before. He mumbled something about volunteering for the Link trainer tomorrow. I told him I thought that was a good idea, dismissed him by turning away and strode off toward the Instructors office.

I never said anything to Smitty nor he to me. But he knew. Everyone in the squadron did. Especially Ellis.